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# Make Your Brand Heard

## A Qualitative Study on the Use of Corporate Podcasts as a Branding Tool

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## Leonie Beck, Sophie Dietrich, Tanja Graf, Xenia Grohmann, Kathleen Lehmann, Sabrina Zierer

## Abstract

As an increasingly popular on-demand medium, podcasts have become more professional and commercialized in recent times. This is also evident from a look at corporate communications, where many companies add podcasts into their communication mix. To align these corporate podcasts with other communication channels, the concept of corporate branding can be helpful. This approach has not been considered by empirical studies so far. Our qualitative interview study wants to investigate the role of corporate podcasts in corporate branding and examines their integration into the communication strategy of nationally and internationally operating companies. 13 experts from large companies responsible for the respective podcast have been interviewed. The research results show that podcasts are mostly integrated into the company's overarching communications strategy and incorporate company-specific branding aspects to varying degrees. Corporate podcasts are primarily used to highlight innovative and modern aspects of the brands, especially through the tone of voice. The intended impact of corporate podcasts is often a personal and emotional connection, interaction, and resonance with listeners. Increasing reputation, visibility, and conveying authenticity is also targeted. As a branding tool, podcasts are evaluated rather implicitly. The general evaluation is perceived as challenging and tends to focus on qualitative performance measurement. This study underscores the high need for research on corporate podcasts as a branding tool as well as for key performance indicators (KPIs) of podcasts.

## Keywords

Corporate Podcasts, Branding, Corporate Communication, Podcast Marketing, Branding Strategy

## Introduction

From a niche phenomenon to an established channel in the media landscape (Bonini, 2015, p. 27) – the evolution of podcasts in recent years is remarkable. The presentation of image- or audio-based media and the associated virtual world are becoming increasingly important in people's everyday lives. Active consumption and the aim to receive, create and distribute content to one's own wishes paved the way for new communication formats (Rowles & Rogers, 2019, p. 15). Podcasts are an increasingly relevant on-demand medium, an auditory multitasking format that allows recipients to receive information or be entertained while engaged in other activities (BBC Global News, 2019).

In recent years, podcasts have become an important part of the media landscape and, at the latest with the addition of podcast delivery to Spotify in 2016, are in a state of commercialization and professionalization (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021, p. 2). Not only due to a huge freedom of choice and the possibility to stream anywhere and anytime, but also due to the growing popularity of the auditory tool among consumers, the innovative communication channel is gaining importance for corporate communications (Kleinjohann, 2020, p. 37). Podcasts are thus en vogue and can complement the communicative portfolio of companies. Rowles and Rogers (2019) emphasize that "podcasting offers a fantastic opportunity to cut through the level of noise that exists online, build an audience, drive engagement and essentially drive your desired outcome" (p. 6). Corporate podcasts consequently enable direct communication with relevant stakeholders without showing clear sales intentions (Schreyer, 2019, p. 11). They are therefore a useful extension of the overall communication mix (BBC Global News, 2019) and should be integrated into the wide range of communication and marketing activities (Kleinjohann, 2020, p. 38; Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 105).

The corporate branding is intended to create a clear brand image of a company and to carry it to the outside world. Therefore, the coordination of content across different communication channels plays a major role. A successful corporate brand conveys its values, sets itself apart from the competition, and can increase stakeholder loyalty (Balmer & Gray, 2003, p. 974). As a communication tool, the company's own podcasts can be observed in the context of corporate branding. This can be helpful in classifying podcasts within the overall communication portfolio and aligning them with other channels. Considering podcasts as a branding tool is an approach that has not been illuminated in research to date. This paper aims to contribute to closing this gap and explores the question:

*How are corporate podcasts integrated as a branding tool into the communication strategies of nationally and internationally operating companies?*

To gain a comprehensive, explorative insight into the field, 13 semi-standardized guided interviews with the main persons responsible for corporate podcasts of various nationally and internationally operating companies are conducted using a qualitative approach. The experts provide detailed insights into the background and goals of the implementation of podcasts in the communication strategy. The aim is to clarify the extent to which podcasts convey the branding of a company. In addition, it is surveyed how branding in corporate podcasts is assessed and evaluated as successful. The extensive input from the guided interviews with selected experts is used to gain new insights into this field.

## Literature Review

The theoretical part of the paper introduces the genre of podcast and gives a brief outline of the development of corporate podcasts as an on-demand medium. After a presentation of the branding concept in corporate communications, podcasts are classified as a branding tool and the research questions underlying the paper are presented.

### The Development of Podcasts as an On-Demand-Medium

The term podcast describes a British neologism composed of iPod, the Apple-branded MP3 player, and broadcasting (Jham et al. 2008, p. 287). This format is composed of individual episodes, which have an arbitrary time span and are released periodically. The auditory files can be accessed on-demand. That means, they do not have a fixed time for listening, as they can be downloaded via the internet and played by computers, smartphones, iPods, or other digital players at any time (Rowles & Rogers, 2019, pp. 12–14). According to the current state of technology, after a digital subscription via a so-called RSS feed (Rich Site Summary), episodically changing auditory content is made available under a thematic umbrella (Brown, 2020, p. 1). The RSS machine-readable file formats of web pages and XML files form the technical basis for playing and retrieving podcasts and enable new episodes to be displayed to users automatically, in preferred programs or apps, after subscription (Johnson & Grayden, 2006, p. 206).
Since the format's cornerstone was laid by the radio moderator Adam Curry in 2004, a veritable podcast boom developed shortly after, which was significantly supported by Apple's iTunes version 4.9. This update from 2005 allowed users to subscribe and manage their podcast library (Sterne et al.,

2008). The medium has experienced increasing professionalization over the years as well as advancements through new technologies (Berry, 2016, p. 661). However, the podcast format only saw a slight but steady increase in subsequent years and struggled to confirm itself as an established mass medium (Bottomley, 2015, p. 165; McClung & Johnson, 2010, p. 84). Most notably, YouTube, a newly developed platform at that time, and the display of public access videos were competing with auditory content (Bottomley, 2015, p. 165). Only a few years later the untapped potential (Sellas, 2013, p. 18) and lack of research on the format were recognized (Markman, 2012, p. 550). With the establishment of podcasts by major music streaming providers such as Spotify or Google Play and regular smartphone use, this again propelled the spread of the format (Sullivan, 2019, p. 9). Bonini (2015) describes this second wave of podcasts of the former niche medium as "from narrowcasting to broadcasting" (p. 27).

Due to easy access, low production costs, high degree of user-friendliness, relatively inexpensive hardware and software equipment, the auditory format is nowadays increasingly developing and establishing itself as an important tool for online communication (Waddingham et al., 2020, p. 276). Advances in media technology, the ever-increasing popularity as well as the expanded production, entail a diversification of the subject areas and formats of the growing industry (Crider, 2022, p. 12; Waddingham et al., 2020, p. 276). A wide range of genres and subject areas of podcasts is developing from niche topics to content for the masses. Accordingly, they can be differentiated in aspects such as the subject matter, the personality of the speakers, or the style of the interview (Waddingham, 2020, p. 276). Schreyer (2020) divides them into categories such as public service, talk, topic, people, conversation, true-crime, fiction, and corporate podcasts (p. 3). However, many formats have been neglected in the literature to date. Research has increasingly focused on podcasts for educational purposes (Chaikovska et al., 2019; Hew, 2009; Pegrum et al., 2015), or on the media format and its evolution (Berry, 2016; Bonini, 2015).

Companies are more interested in designing and publishing their own podcasts, which are defined as corporate podcasts (Schreyer, 2019, p. 2). This format can serve the internal and external communication of companies and their distribution of information. It also enables direct contact with all relevant reference groups and can be used differently. Corporate podcasts also count as owned media (Schreyer, 2019, pp. 10–11). So far, literature has been published on approaches of the advantages and disadvantages, usage motives and modes of action of the medium as well as success factors for their use (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2020; Chang & Chevher, 2007; McClung & Johnson,

2010; Schreyer, 2019). Nevertheless, the empirical study of corporate podcasts has been deficient to date and requires further research.

## The Role of Podcasts in Corporate Communication

Traditional approaches to corporate communications and their persuasive, one-sided use have lost much of their validity and relevance over the past few years. The environment of communication, information procurement and dissemination is increasingly changing. Especially due to digitalization and mediatization, companies are dependent on providing novel technologies and channels to communicate digitally with relevant stakeholders in a direct way (Zerfaß & Piwinger, 2007, p. 14).

Chang and Cevher (2007) evaluate podcasts as a useful tool for companies to increase both their online visibility and reach (p. 266). They point out that it can be used as a "[…] pull mechanism", with the goal of attracting a niche audience (Chang & Cevher, 2007, p. 264). Podcasts also help to reach a younger target group with little scattering loss, as they represent most podcast consumers (Chang & Cevher, 2007, p. 273). In addition, the auditory medium can make use of the emerging trend of storytelling, which serves as a new narrative format for companies due to its immersive character (Dowling & Miller, 2019, p. 167). Storytelling describes a method in which information is conveyed through stories, thereby building deeper relationships with people (Lindgren, 2021, p. 13). Corporate podcasts enable regular communication with listeners and thus offer the opportunity to gain their loyalty and trust (Chang & Cevher, 2007, p. 266).

For listeners, information content, entertainment and independent use represent the most important factors for consuming podcasts (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2020, p. 684). This individually selected time and listening environment can cause a kind of parasocial relationship between the individual speakers and the consumers (Berry, 2016, p. 13). Parasocial relationships are understood as a connection with a media personality that develops over a longer period through emotional and behavioral processes (Giles, 2002, pp. 279–281). By building parasocial relationships with hosts, podcasts can be used for persuasive communication. Subscribers may be more open to advertising messages and not necessarily perceive advertising as a disruptive factor (McClung & Johnson, 2010, p. 94).

In summary, the growing audio trend, the breakup of traditional communication structures, and the possibility of individual positioning lead to an increasing relevance of podcasts also for corporate communications (Deseniss, 2011, pp. 138–139; Schreyer, 2019, pp. 9–11). One of the initial approaches of researching the use of podcasts in corporate communications is the study by Doberts et al. (2021). The authors concentrate on the strategic

implementation of podcasts in external communications. Other than that, there is little research on the integration of podcasts into a company's communication strategy.

## The Relevance of the Corporate Branding Concept

When corporate podcasts are considered in the context of corporate communications, it is worth mentioning that they are not a stand-alone medium but rather an addition to the overarching communication mix (Kleinjohann, 2020, p. 38). They usually exist alongside other channels such as blogs or websites (Scott, 2011, p. 85), which is why the meaningful integration of a podcast into the communication strategy is seen as a decisive success factor (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 105). One way to align the different channels is to look at them in the context of corporate branding. Especially in marketing research, the concept receives a lot of attention, but there is little agreement on how to clearly delineate it (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012, p. 1052; Cornelissen et al., 2012, p. 1095). According to Balmer (2001), the question "What is the promise inferred from/communicated by the brand?" should be answered in the context of corporate branding (p. 257). A company's brand emerges from and is thus dependent on the identity of a company (Balmer & Podnar, 2021, p. 732). It can be carried outward through visuals and communicative elements (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012, p. 1053). Coherent positioning of the brand anchors a unique brand image, which in turn enables differentiation from the competition (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004, p. 374). If the brand experience is consistent and evokes positive associations, this provides the foundation for a company's good reputation and increases the loyalty of stakeholders (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004, p. 374; Balmer & Gray, 2003, p. 974). The resulting longer-term interaction with the brand can therefore be seen as a value-creating process (Simmons, 2007, p. 545).

In addition to external features such as the brand name and logo, all the various communication channels play a role in building or maintaining a brand (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004, p. 368; Keller & Brexendorf, 2019, p. 165). The communication activities should therefore fit the identity of a company and create a clear image (Esch & Langner, 2019, p. 180). For this to be implemented successfully, it is helpful to first reduce the brand to tangible characteristics (Esch & Langner, 2019, p. 181). Different models and concepts are suitable for this. The 'brand steering wheel' by Esch (2014, p. 104) is one of these models. It captures five central dimensions: brand attributes, brand benefits, brand tonalities, brand iconography and brand competence (Esch & Langner, 2019, pp. 185–186). The model helps to make different facets of the brand visible and therefore provides a basis for the consistent

alignment of various communication activities. Consistency is important to create a strong corporate brand which then successfully builds a clear brand image among stakeholders (Esch & Langner, 2019, p. 182; Keller & Brexendorf, 2019, p. 173).

## Corporate Podcasts as a Branding Tool

All communication channels can possibly affect the brand awareness and strengthen or create unique brand associations (Keller & Brexendorf, 2019, p. 165). Consequently, podcasts should also be considered a relevant channel in this context. As early as 2005, West writes: "Podcasting technology could be used for both external and internal communications and branding" (2005, p. 267). Chang and Cevher (2007) and Haygood (2007) state shortly after, that podcasts are a new opportunity to convey promotional content and can therefore be seen as a useful tool in marketing. Although the relevance of podcasts for corporate communications and their potential use in branding were highlighted more than ten years ago, there are few empirical studies in this area. The focus of previous research has been primarily on the integration of advertising into non-corporate podcasts – the so-called "podvertising" (Chang & Cevher, 2007; Domenichini, 2018; Haygood, 2007; Moe, 2021). In this case, brand-related content is received in a framework that creates a high level of involvement among users (Domenichini, 2018, p. 48; Haygood, 2007, p. 521). The fact that the entire podcast can be company-owned and used for brand communication is not considered.

The effectiveness of corporate podcasts is demonstrated by the international BBC-Global-News-Study 'Audio: Activated' from 2019. Among other insightful information, the study shows that listeners make unconscious, mostly positive, associations with the brand, based on the words they hear in the podcast (BBC Global News, 2019). The intimate and conversational environment of a corporate podcast (referred to in the study as 'branded podcast') leads to high engagement with the brand. At the same time, companies can deliver their brand messages at moments that would not traditionally provide an opportunity for this content. This makes podcasts a useful addition to the communication mix (BBC Global News, 2019).

Corporate podcasts are a versatile tool in the brand communication process and can be used in various areas. In addition to classic external branding, they can also be an innovative opportunity for promoting knowledge transfer in internal communication (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 108). Company-related topics can be presented in an entertaining way. In employer branding, podcasts can present a company as an attractive employer and employees can share their personal experiences (Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 107). Furthermore, corporate podcasts can be considered under the aspect of

acoustic branding where a brand is designed, characterized, and positioned through acoustic elements in communication (Kleinjohann, 2020, p. 2). Verbal and non-verbal elements such as jingles, brand voices or sound logos make the brand distinguishable (Kleinjohann, 2020, pp. 7–16). These elements can be integrated into corporate podcasts. The use of podcasts in line with the company's branding can create an auditorily recognizable brand presence (Kleinjohann, 2020, p. 47).

## Research Questions

Over the last few years, podcasts have become increasingly relevant in corporate communications. They are often added as an additional instrument in the overarching communication mix and therefore need to be coordinated with other channels (Scott, 2011, p. 85). For this reason, podcasts should be regarded in the context of branding to ensure a consistent brand image. This aspect has not yet been sufficiently explored in research and thus provides an ideal starting point for an exploratory approach. To contribute to closing the existing research gap, the following question is explored:

*How are corporate podcasts integrated as a branding tool into the communication strategies of nationally and internationally operating companies?*

It is becoming increasingly important for corporate communications to be oriented to current trends, new technologies, and innovative channels (Chang & Cevher, 2007, p. 272). Several authors have already shown that the market for audio media is growing and becoming more professional (Kleinjohann, 2008, p. 38; Schreyer, 2016, p. 3) and that both internal and external stakeholders can be reached (Schreyer, 2019, p. 10). When companies publish their own podcast, they are facing the challenge to fulfil the requirements for a successful podcast: A coherent concept and the alignment of the podcast with other communicative activities (Schreyer, 2019, p. 13; Krugmann & Pallus, 2008, p. 105). The reasons for implementing a podcast and how it is integrated form the first subordinate research question:

*RQ1: What are the companies' motivations for implementing a corporate podcast into the communication strategy?*

All communicative activities can impact the brand of a company (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004, p. 368), which is why they should clearly emerge from the corporate brand and not contradict each other (Langner & Esch, 2019, p. 602). Corporate branding should communicate the promises of a brand

(Balmer, 2001, p. 257) and convey the company's identity to stakeholders (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012, p. 1053). Since corporate podcasts should be considered in the context of all other communication and marketing activities (Kleinjohann, 2020, p. 38), the question arises to what extent relevant branding content can be found in corporate podcasts:

*RQ2: What aspects of company-specific branding are conveyed in corporate podcasts?*

An important step in corporate branding is the monitoring of success and the resulting adjustment of the brand (Häusler, 2019, p. 11). To optimize communication on an ongoing basis, it is important to evaluate whether the communication mix is designed effectively, efficiently, and to what extent the respective communicative activities contribute to its success (Bruhn et al., 2014, p. 106). As there is little empirical research in this field in general, information about the effectiveness of podcasts is also scarce. Whether and how the branding aspect is considered in the evaluation of the communication channel is focused by the third research question:

*RQ3: To what extent is branding considered in the evaluation of the success of corporate podcasts?*

## Methodology

Since the use of corporate podcasts as a branding tool and as part of corporate communications has hardly been examined to date, a qualitative approach can help to gain new exploratory insights (Brosius et al., 2015, p. 86). Therefore, guided expert interviews are conducted to answer the research questions (Brosius et al., 2015, p. 86).
A heterogenous sample is aspired to include as many perspectives as possible. The sampling is deliberate and criterion-driven which makes it possible to compare a wide variety of corporate podcasts and generate new perspectives. The basic population includes companies with more than 249 employees, which in Germany are referred to as large companies (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021, p. 4). In smaller companies, the communications department often consists of only one person whereas large companies have more financial and personnel resources for implementing further communication channels, such as corporate podcasts (Jossé, 2016, p. 759). The companies in the basic population have at least one firmly established external podcast format with at least five published episodes that aren't older than two years. For low language barriers, the podcasts must be in German or English. The corresponding podcasts should be part of the external communication and

not be explicitly addressed to current employees. Media companies are excluded from the sample because their knowledge of the provision of communications could distort the results. The inclusion of podcasts in the sample is not restricted in terms of content, which is why different formats such as topic, CEO, talk, or action podcasts are represented. To achieve a global view of corporate podcasts, not only German companies are included, but also multinational companies with German- or English-language podcasts. Under these premises corporate podcasts are searched and a total of 62 companies are contacted.

The final sample consists of 13 corporate podcasts, as shown in Table 1. Having their headquarter in Germany, six companies with a German-language podcast and four companies with an English-language podcast can be acquired. In addition, the sample includes three multinational companies with headquarters outside of Germany and a German-language podcast. The interviews were conducted with experts responsible for the respective corporate podcast as they can offer detailed insights through their professional experience. In favor of spatial flexibility, the interviews were guided via video conference software. Open questions were used to fully grasp the individual subjective perspectives of the interviewees and pick up unexpected impulses (Mayring, 2016, p. 68). To create the interview guideline, the research interest derived from the theory was translated into tangible interview questions.

**Table 1.**
*Final sample of interview partners.*

| Company | Podcast Name | Launch |
|---|---|---|
| Basellandschaftliche Kantonalbank | Was morgen für mich zählt. [What counts for me tomorrow.] | 09/2020 |
| Bayerische Motoren Werke AG | Hypnopolis | 06/2020 |
| Danfoss | Drehmomente – Der Antriebspodcast [Torque – The Drive podcast] | 06/2020 |
| EQUOM Group | heart2heart by AMORELIE | 02/2019 |
| Hermes Germany GmbH Executive Communications | Lieferzeit. Der Logistik-Podcast. [Delivery Time. The Logistics Podcast] | 02/2021 |
| Mercedes-Benz AG | Let's Talk Mercedes | 05/2020 |
| Otto GmbH & Co. KG Communications, Corporate Marketing and Public Affairs | O-TON [O-SOUND] | 11/2019 |
| Philip Morris International | Make Tomorrow New | 03/2021 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Robert Bosch GmbH | From KNOW-HOW to WOW | 11/2020 |
| SAP SE | SAP Experts Podcast | 08/2019 |
| Tchibo GmbH | 5 Tassen täglich<br>[5 Cups a Day] | 01/2020 |
| Vodafone GmbH | Digitale Vorreiter:innen<br>[Digital Pioneers] | 10/2019 |
| Volkswagen AG | Shaping Mobility | 03/2021 |

Three research questions arise from the guiding research interest concerning the integration of corporate podcasts as a branding tool into the communication strategy. The research questions are well suited for structuring the interviews, as they each open a separate field of knowledge and logically build on one another. Therefore, they form the basis of the interview guide.

To answer the first research question, general reasons for implementing a corporate podcast in the communication strategy are surveyed. Linked to this is the interest in specific target groups of the podcast and in the relevance of the podcast in relation to other communication channels. The interview questions which are related to the second research question, investigate the specific branding aspects of the corporate podcast. For this purpose, the questions take up aspects of Esch's (2014) brand steering wheel (p. 104). In addition, it is determined whether elements of acoustic branding are integrated into the podcast. Finally, the third research question was operationalized by questions that asked the experts to provide information on the evaluation of the success of using the respective corporate podcast as a branding tool.

Regarding the data evaluation, the interviews are transcribed according to the rules of the transcription system of Dresing and Pehl (2012, pp. 25–27) and reviewed according to Kuckartz (2018) with the content-structuring content analysis (pp. 97–121). Within this qualitative-interpretative technique (Mayring, 2016, p. 66), a final category system is established within two coding rounds as can be seen in Table 2. The entire transcript is coded and analyzed computer-based with the final and differentiated category system via MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020 Teaching Software.

**Table 2.**

*The final category system.*

| Research Question | Associated Main Categories |
|---|---|
| RQ1 | MC1: Motives for the implementation of the corporate podcast<br>MC2: Embedding in communication strategy<br>MC3: Desired target group |

|  |  |
|---|---|
|  | MC4: Relevance within communication channels |
|  | MC5: Generation of visibility via own channels |
|  | MC6: Organization of the corporate podcast |
| RQ2 | MC7: Corporate branding |
|  | MC8 Thematic focus |
|  | MC9: Tonality in the corporate podcast |
|  | MC10: Added value of the corporate podcast for listeners |
|  | MC11: Aufio branding |
| RQ3 | MC12: Evaluation – measurement and tools |
|  | MC13: Impact intentions |
|  | MC14: Success factors |
| Reflections | MC15: Interview situation |

## Results

The presentation of the findings is based on the research questions. The motivation for implementation is followed by a breakdown of the results on the integration of branding aspects into the corporate podcast. The chapter concludes with a consideration of corporate podcasts in the success evaluation of branding.

### Results for RQ1: The Implementation of Corporate Podcasts

Within the first research question, we investigated the motivations for implementing a podcast in the communication strategy of a company with *MC1-MC6* and came to the following conclusions:

For many companies, the trend towards podcasts is one of the main reasons they started one themselves. This was captured under *MC1: Motives for the implementation of the corporate podcast.* Several corporations feel that participating in this movement is valuable and one expert even said that it is important *"that as a brand, you're not just riding the podcast wave, you want to be involved in shaping it"*. Another reason for implementing this purely auditive medium, is to use podcasts as a suitable extension for existing channels with their ability to delve deeper into topics and cover them more intensively.

Most interviewees comment positively on *MC2: Embedding in the communication strategy*. It is emphasized that the medium fits easily into the communication strategy and podcasts are mentioned several times as established and integral parts of corporate communications. For the most part, they pick up the topics of other owned media channels to create a common thread. However, a full embedding is not given in all cases. Some podcasts

were only slightly aligned with other communication activities and thus only integrated to a small extent into the overall communication.

The statements on target groups of podcasts are coded in *MC3: Embedding in communication strategy* and differ a lot. Some companies want to address the media landscape, especially journalists as multipliers. Customers in the B2C sector or business customers as well as decision-makers, clients, and employees of other companies are desired recipients. Some of the interviewees name target groups that were not tapped by their companies before as the intended audiences. In most cases, these groups are characterized by their poor accessibility. Own employees are often considered as a possible secondary target group. One company even notes positive effects of their podcast in employer branding and human resources.

The relevance, advantages and disadvantages of podcasts are assessed under *MC4: Relevance within communication channels*. Most professionals mentioned the relevance as still low but with an increasing tendency in contrast to other communication channels. Others placed the podcasts on the same level as other channels. Especially in the automotive sector, the medium is considered as well established. It is not seen as innovative but more as a must-have with the trend developing towards owning multiple podcasts. The length of corporate podcasts can be optimally used to illustrate topics more profoundly and on a larger scale, as well as to explain complex topics in more detail. This is set in stark contrast to fast-moving social media channels, as these not only hold a short lifespan of topics but can often only provide small snippets. Due to this, the purely auditive medium is a functional addition to the communication mix and, in contrast to moving image material, is quicker and easier to implement. Furthermore, the possibility of entertaining recipients on-the-go is the most frequently mentioned advantage. This makes it possible to reach certain target groups that have fewer opportunities to use visual media. As an on-the-go and on-demand medium, the podcast is easy to consume next to other activities and creates a situation in which the listener spends a lot of time with the respective brand.

While podcasts hold the previously mentioned advantages, the lack of visual stimuli is often mentioned as a disadvantage of the medium, too. This non-existent component makes it more difficult to present certain topics in podcasts, especially, if more complex technical matters are to be explained. It is also emphasized that the audio format is not suitable for short news-like stories. Other interviewees also name the lower speed and smaller reach as a downside of podcasts, as well as the lower intensity of corporate branding in contrast to social media channels. Social media offers faster growing key performance indicators than podcasts if the corresponding media budget is used for this purpose. Another complication is the measurement of success,

which will be discussed in more detail in *Chapter 4.4*. However, several companies emphasize that each channel is different and has its own strengths and weaknesses.

Unlike most respondents, some companies do not promote their podcast through owned media. This was evaluated using *MC5: Generation of visibility via own channels*. The most frequently mentioned owned media channels are various social media platforms, blogs, and newsletters. Some podcasts get promoted in press releases or with either purpose-built or the company's websites. While one company publishes its podcast via an own YouTube channel, another uses YouTube to advertise this audio medium. However, this is only done on a small scale and is still being tested for its effectiveness. Among all surveyed corporations, this is the only paid advertising activity.

Following the key findings of *MC6: Organization of the Corporate Podcast* are reported. The effort expended on a podcast is described very differently. Some companies feel that the capacities required are quite high. Others think that the cost-benefit ratio justifies the effort and state that they are responsible for the support of the podcast in addition to their actual work. Almost all companies are supported by agencies. Some already at the topic identification and elaboration, others get agencies for the production and moderation, and most companies get an external service provider for the evaluation of the podcast. The frequency of releases of podcasts varies, with several companies aiming for one episode per week. With one exception, all podcasts incorporate guests who provide expertise on specific topics as well as authenticity. The guests can be employees, external persons, and sometimes public personas.

## Results for RQ2: Company-Specific Branding in Corporate Podcasts

To answer the second research question, *MC7-MC11* are considered to specify company-specific branding in corporate podcasts. The main category *MC7: Corporate Branding* includes aspects that relate to the branding of the companies and contribute to the formation of a coherent corporate brand. For this purpose, statements on concrete brand attributes, the use of the podcasts for corporate branding and disadvantages associated with the format were included. All companies made specific statements about using company-specific branding aspects for their podcast. It appears that all companies integrate these into their audio format in various ways.

One main way to include company-specific branding aspects is to implement brand attributes that characterize the company. Even if the brand attributes differ within the sample, some overlaps can be found. Therefore, sustainability can be highlighted as a central brand attribute for many

companies, as well as innovation and future orientation. Furthermore, brand attributes, like the creation of a community, closeness, and approachability, build the foundation of company's branding in corporate podcasts. As an example, within the automotive industry, the brand attributes range from a focus on sportiness and tension over luxury and design to digitalization and electric mobility.

Great importance is attributed to the thematic focus and different topics discussed within the podcasts. The main category *MC8: Thematic focus of the corporate podcast* therefore refers to the companies' choice of topics as well as their motivations for these thematic areas. This also includes information regarding the orientation of the topics to the respective corporate branding of the companies and their choice of format.

Within the podcasts, various topics are covered. It is noticeable that some companies see the topic of sustainability as a focal point, which reaches back to its use as a brand attribute. Among other things, controversial topics like corporate positioning or sustainable action are also specifically highlighted within the podcasts. Moreover, topics such as society and politics are covered, whereby the relevance for the company must always be clarified. One interviewee mentions that the format enables the *"positioning of [the] CEO with a focus on social and political topics that he addresses with people from the public"*, which constitutes a potential of corporate podcasts. Similarly, technology and technical innovations are also perceived as important subjects to be presented within the audio format, that is thereby accessible to everyone, and creates the opportunity to share expert knowledge. Corporate cultural aspects are also mentioned as potentials to position within this audio format.

Several companies do not advertise their products within their podcast because theming the product could be perceived as inappropriate and untrustworthy. Legal ordinances are also factoring into this decision. To what extent the concept of the podcasts follows a strategy, is estimated very differently. Still, the majority of podcasts are aligned with a corporate positioning strategy and the corporate branding. Regarding the format of the podcasts, many companies have opted for a talk format. Various reasons are given for this, such as conveying closeness, the positioning possibilities of the CEO, the creation of authenticity, the appealing conversational character, and the production advantage.

The claims of the companies also form an essential foundation for the content design of the podcasts. Foremost, this concerns the thematic selection, which is adapted to the statement of the claim. Thus, companies with claims, which express for example innovation and progress, also refer to those topics within their podcasts. If a company is characterized by a claim that above

all demonstrates closeness, a sense of togetherness or diversity, these aspects are also reflected within the corporate podcast. Values such as community and solidarity are often shown through the integration of many voices and personalities, so that here, too, as expressed in the claim, the idea of a community and the simultaneous brand core can be found. Employer branding also plays an essential role in this context. The positioning as an employer brand does not stop at the claim of the company but is continued within the podcast. In this way, the audio format provides an insight into the corporate culture and creates an image of togetherness, which is often shown through the integration of various employees of the company as contributors to the corporate podcast.

The main category *MC9: Tonality* captures how the brand presents itself in the audio format and what emotional impressions it conveys to its customers. Here, the companies focus on appearing particularly authentic to their listeners. Therefore, most companies deliberately avoid editing the podcasts and using scripts. Instead, broad interview guidelines are developed before recording or leading questions are used. One interviewee says: *"Sometimes the conversation arises in a completely different way, or sometimes a topic comes up that was not even as perhaps intended in the first place, and that is important to us, that it is a nice, authentic exchange and not a question-and-answer format"*.

The editing of the podcast is also important for the authenticity. Only one company completely forgoes cuts, while others mainly use 'soft cutting' whereby the use of the cuts is approached very differently. While some shorten monologues and cut out slips of the tongue, others deliberately leave them in their podcast to create an authentic, open conversation for the listeners. The tone in the podcast should also reflect the brand as well as the company culture, either the current one or the one that is aspired. One interviewee explains: *"[We] see [...] ourselves as a brand that is optimistic, that is inspiring, [...] pioneering, open, and all these are attributes or elements that we also bring across in our podcast"*. Brand changes also affect the podcast and are supported by it. If the tonality corresponds to the current state, the podcast is also suitable for employer branding. In German, a distinction is made between a formal address, which is used primarily in business contexts and often indicates a more distant relationship, and the personal address which is interpreted more casually and indicates a closer relationship. Most of the German-language podcasts use exclusively the personal address 'at eye level' for their interlocutors, some also for addressing their listeners. Others deliberately refrain from addressing their listeners directly. Authenticity is perceived as relevant because it is a way to entertain the listeners and, at the same time, to bind them to the podcast.

*MC10: Added value* includes the utility that the company provides to the listeners through the corporate podcast. Many companies primarily want to convey knowledge and information to the audience. This includes professional, in-depth knowledge in the subject area of the podcast, which is made accessible to the listeners and goes beyond that of other communication channels, such as insights into the company, additional information, and recommendations. However, this knowledge should, according to one interviewee, *"provide a look behind the scenes in an emotional, entertaining, but also informative way"*. This is important to create a relation to the listeners and a positive brand experience for them. The third added value is inspiration, to broaden one's mind and to evoke new perspectives. This is created by telling exciting and unusual stories and is also related to entertainment.

*MC11: Audio branding* is a special category because it is important to distinguish between the companies that have an existing brand sound and those that do not. The companies that do not have a brand sound try to reflect their identity with their podcast sound. For the creation they reflect what feelings and impression the sound evokes for the audience to support the corporate brand. If there is already a brand sound, this is used as a basis and, for example, existing audio libraries are used. Other companies put a lot of effort into developing a standalone design for the podcast that still reflects the company's branding to create recognition.

The most important audio element within the podcast is the jingle, which is used in all corporate podcasts and is intended to create both a framework for the audio format and recognition. Most companies exclusively use their jingle for their corporate podcast, only one company uses it for other purposes. Two interviewees say that they are going further with their sound design than the jingle. While one of them relies on small effects to lighten up the information and emphasize what is being said, the other one has a complex sonic branding that is used to create an immersive experience for the audience.

Another important auditory constant in the podcast is the moderation. Here, the interviewees emphasize the professionalism of their external moderators. They have a direct influence on the format through their own anecdotes and increase the podcasts authenticity. The use of a company-internal moderation as a CEO podcast or the concept of various alternating moderators is the exception but can be very useful for employer branding. However, problems can also arise, as untrained moderators can have difficulties in authentically conveying what is being said. Overall, the moderator is deliberately selected based on various criteria, for example that the person fits the brand and hast sufficient knowledge of the topic.

## Results for RQ3: Branding within Performance Measurement

To answer the third research question, the categories *MC12-MC14*, are evaluated. The main category *MC12: Evaluation: Measurement & Tools* contains background information on the evaluation of the corporate podcast such as key performance indicators, tools used or perceived challenges in measuring success. Important key figures for the surveyed companies are the click rate and the number of downloads. In some cases, the number of unique listens is also differentiated, i.e., whether a person has listened to the respective episode several times. The retention rate is also an important success indicator for many of the companies as so-called time spent with a brand. Furthermore, the number of subscribers is considered. The increase in sales as a key performance indicator, on the other hand, is only considered in isolated cases, as it is difficult to measure. One of the companies also reflects how many other episodes the listener has heard. In some cases, aspects such as geographic location, regional differences, playback device or the success of the visuals on social media are also observed. Most companies use tools such as Podigee, Google Analytics, Google Data Studio, or Captivate to support the evaluation.

For the interview participants, measuring the resonance and interaction generated by the podcast is relevant for evaluation in terms of successful branding. This is shown by the inductive category *SC12.9: Resonance and interaction* in form of qualitative internal as well as external feedback is particularly emphasized by the interview partners. Also valuable are the evaluation possibilities on platforms or media resonance. Listing in podcast charts or winning awards is also evaluated. One of the companies also proactively conducts a brand perception and advertising impact survey.

The evaluation of the main category *MC13: Impact intention* illustrates the companies' desired impact through the corporate podcast and suggests the extent to which the interviewees are referring to branding. The inductive categories show that the companies increasingly want to use the podcasts to strengthen the emotional and personal connection with the listeners, to promote interaction with them, to increase visibility or reputation, or to convey authenticity. For example, one interview participant describes the podcast as a conversation where someone would sit at a kitchen table. Corporate podcasts are titled as a relationship-building channel and one of the companies wants to emotionally connect its target audience especially through audio design. To generate interaction, for example, a reactive narrative or community involvement through an idea contest is used. In terms of increased visibility and reputation through the corporate podcast, the companies surveyed would like to be considered a trusted advisor or relevant to the market

and see an opportunity for greater transparency. One company describes its own podcast as *"a showcase, not only for us as corporate communications [...], but also in particular for the company and the employees"*. For an authentic effect, one of the companies for example deliberately involves critical stakeholders. Other companies also see podcasts as an opportunity to authentically show their own corporate culture – some even see this as a recipe for success.

The main category *MC14: Success factors* asks specifically about the interviewees' personal key indicators for the success of their corporate podcasts and reflects the extent to which they proactively establish a connection with corporate branding. The interviewees name as success factors that listeners learn something new, are inspired, and that the podcast is varied. Furthermore, professional audio quality is named as a success factor, i.e., that everything the company publishes in the audio area is of high quality and entertaining to listen to, as one interviewee states. A clear target group and choice of topic, the considered selection of host and guests, and the episode length are also seen as critical to success. Finally, the podcast should represent the companies' values instead of relying on self-promotion. One company also considers it a success that the perception of the brand in the podcast has been positively improved by around 75 % of respondents of their own survey.

The interviewees also expressed lessons learned and critical aspects from previous evaluations. One company was particularly critical of their podcast regarding the low click rate, the insufficient integration into the corporate strategy, and the double role of the CEO as guest and host. Other companies hope for more interaction or more lively guests in the podcast. The interviewees rate the central importance of headlines, regular periodicity, and qualitative evaluation as lesson learned. Most of the companies see their podcast as a rather long-term format with a lot of potential. Only one interviewee is rather doubtful about the future of the podcast in ten years.

The companies cite various challenges in evaluating corporate podcasts. According to the evaluation of the category *MC12: Measurement & Tools*, there is the problem of not being able to track background information such as the profession or gender of the listeners and to differentiate between internal and external listeners. Furthermore, listening time is not measurable on some platforms and the impact of the podcast on sales is difficult to pin down. One interviewee is working closely with Spotify on more cross-platform click rate tracking, which has so far been inconsistent. In general, interviewees see the evaluation of corporate podcasts as very time-consuming and KPIs are still uncertain for this relatively new format.

## Discussion

Answering the research question on the motivations for implementing a corporate podcast in the overarching communication strategy revealed the following: According to Zerfaß and Piwinger (2007), companies increasingly need to provide novel channels for communicating with stakeholders to directly meet their needs and successfully communicate with them (p. 14). This is confirmed by many of the corporations surveyed with their various justifications for creating and distributing corporate podcasts. The increase in podcast consumers of all ages in recent years highlights the growing relevance and popularity of the audio format (Kupferschmitt & Müller, 2020, p. 380) and motivates more companies to include this comparatively new channel in their communication strategy. The trend toward corporate podcasts is an essential motivator for producing a company's own audio format. The on-demand medium not only offers the possibility of increasing the organization's online visibility and reach to existing stakeholders, but also provides an opportunity to obtain the attention of previously unreached or hard-to-reach audiences (Chang & Cevher, 2007, p. 266). Both are significant considerations for the companies that drove the implementation of their own podcast. Chang and Cevher (2007) also mention that podcasts can be used to attract niche audiences (p. 264), which an interviewee confirmed. With their podcasts, companies can specifically address relatively small target groups like technicians and engineers from various industries who are on the road a lot in everyday life and spend little time in the office. Through other diverse advantages such as an intensive and in-depth treatment of topics and a convenient use of the medium on the road or alongside other activities, corporate podcasts represent an attractive addition to other, already established communication channels and thus to the communication strategy of the companies.

Regarding the use of company-specific branding aspects for the corporate podcast, it appears that all companies integrate these into their audio format differently, in the form of their thematic focus, tonality, or auditory features. However, some of this is not strategically intended but rather results from the formats' inherent possibilities. Specific brand attributes can also be found within the respective podcasts, which are integrated through the thematic selection of topics and audibly underpinned with elements of audio branding.

The corporate podcast is particularly important in terms of employer branding. It is used by companies as a tool to retain or acquire current and potential employees and communicate the corporate culture to them. Meffert et al. (2015) already emphasized the relevance of this type of branding in

addition to internal and external branding (p. 334). Most companies use the tonality to give an authentic insight to the corporate culture. One company goes further and puts the focus on the companies' people. To create high authenticity, both guests and the moderator are company-internal persons. Even if difficulties can arise due to the excitement of inexperienced interview partners, cuts are avoided as far as possible to be able to record a comprehensively realistic picture within the framework of branding. The claim can also contribute to the branding as an employer brand and enables the sense of a community. Furthermore, the claim is mentioned several times in terms of corporate branding in general and is found to be implemented within the podcasts on various levels.

It is striking that 'corporate branding' is perceived as a concept difficult to grasp for many of our interviewees. The reasons for this knowledge gap were not further explored in the context of this study. Although, in one specific case, the unclarity of the term could be referred to the interviewees' professional background, as the corporate podcast is not located in marketing or communications within their company, but in the area of sales.

In conclusion, differences were found in terms of companies' consistency in using podcasts for corporate branding. One organization stands out as very consistent. Their brand identity focuses on entertainment, which is primarily reflected in the added value and the theme format. Although the company is not named, they try to positively influence brand perception through high quality storytelling and audio design. They do not want to be seen as participants but as leaders in the podcast domain and therefore try to integrate innovative aspect as well as interaction with the audience. In contrast, another company does not consciously implement their corporate branding into their podcast. Although the CEO positions himself within the corporate podcast as future-oriented by discussing topics that will determine tomorrow, and thus referring to their claim, it is emphasized that the choice of topics does not consider the organization's corporate branding concept and audio branding. This is aligned with the corporate identity, but concrete examples of the manner are not mentioned. Only the use of the first name of the interlocutors can be interpreted as fitting to the modern and future-oriented appearance of the brand.

Now, the results regarding branding within performance measurement are discussed. It is noticeable that branding aspects are mentioned implicitly. Examples are that the podcasts should represent the corporate culture or that one of the companies wants to position itself as high-quality in the audio sector. Another interviewee wants all communication activities to contribute to branding but does stress this in the evaluation of their podcast.

Accordingly, there is a need for further clarification regarding the role of branding in the evaluation of corporate podcasts and as a success factor.

In terms of impact intention, the following aspects are frequently mentioned: emotional and personal connection, generating resonance and interaction, an authentic impact, improving reputation, and increased visibility. The former is reminiscent of the concept of parasocial relationships explained in the literature review of this paper (Berry, 2016; Klimmt et al., 2006). Regarding interaction, a reference to the positive correlation between perceived parasocial interaction and willingness to subscribe to podcasts according to Marx et al. (2021) is remarkable.

In short, most of the companies surveyed view podcasts as a long-term tool with one exception. However, there are indications in the performance measurement that corporate podcasts have so far been evaluated too little as a branding tool. This could indicate that their potential here is not yet being sufficiently exploited by companies.

The limitations of this research project are now reflected upon. When interpreting the present research results, it is important to bear in mind that they are not representative due to the qualitative research design (Bell et al., 2018, p. 389). A further limitation of this work is that the desired number of English-language corporate podcasts from companies outside Germany was unfortunately not achieved in the acquisition of the sample due to the lack of availability of these companies. While choosing the interview partners, it was challenging to comprehend whether they had implemented the corporate podcast themselves or at least had background information on their introduction.

The interview guide proved to be complete and comprehensible during data collection. Content-related queries occurred only sporadically but indicate an ambiguity of the branding concept in practical use. This is shown by some coded contradictions in the statements of the interviewees. It therefore is advisable for future research to explain the technical terms used, such as branding or jingle, at the beginning of the interview to ensure a common definition.

In the data analysis it became apparent that in some interviews more data was collected than originally planned, since the interviewees also talked about other corporate podcasts of the organization. For this, the subcategory *SC6.6: Other corporate podcasts of the organization* was created with concrete coding rules. The deductive-inductive approach according to Kuckartz (2018) proved to be very suitable for the data analysis. The well-differentiated category system proved itself during the coding processes and the intercoder reliability was also adequate.

From the present results, interesting implications for practice and research can be derived. They foremost highlight the high need for research regarding corporate podcasts as a branding tool. In addition, there are further starting points for future research. Since this methodological design primarily focuses on large companies, it would be interesting to find out to what extent smaller companies and other institutions use podcasts in their corporate communications and as an instrument for corporate branding. Furthermore, it was confirmed in practice as well as in the current state of research that there is a lack of clarity regarding the branding concept and that there is a need for further studies here as well. To gain more insights into the thematic focus of corporate podcasts, it is recommended to conduct a quantitative content analysis of these organizational audio formats to learn more about the extent of branding practiced within them. Finally, there is a need to define and research adequate KPIs of podcasts in practice. Also of relevance would be a qualitative content analysis of various communication channels used for corporate branding by companies. This would provide insights into the significance of the respective channels and their interaction about a coherent brand image. A differentiation of visual, auditory as well as audio-visual formats would be advisable to assess to what extent certain aspects of branding are integrated within these areas. It is not only the companies that can be addressed, but also the recipients. Above all, media impact analyses on the influence of corporate podcasts on the perception of companies can provide helpful implications for theory and practice. Here, a comparative examination of the impact goals of companies and their actual occurrence among recipients would be of interest to investigate. This could also allow implications about the actual added value for companies and the respective target groups equally.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study is to answer the question of how corporate podcasts are integrated into the overall communication strategy of companies as a branding tool. With the help of 13 semi-standardized interviews, this can be answered as follows:

The embedding of corporate podcasts in the overarching communication strategy of nationally and internationally operating companies is mostly ensured in the present cases and is actively pursued. This is clearly demonstrated by the frequent promotion of the audio product via other owned media channels of the companies as well as the strong integration of podcasts on corporate websites. The cross-channel thematic focus of the communication activities continues in the podcast, which is seen as a useful and more in-depth addition for this purpose.

Company-specific branding aspects are considered and integrated to varying degrees. The corporate identity usually forms the basis for the podcast, on which brand attributes, the thematic focus and tonality are adopted and adapted to the audio format. The sound design is also based on the brand identity. For this purpose, a suitable moderation is chosen, a jingle is developed, and the brand's slogan is integrated into the podcast. The adaptation of the audio format is shown by highlighting topics that are an integral part of the corporate brand in an authentic way. Often informal tonality is used to keep the listeners' attention and create a sense of approachability. The added value generated as infotainment for listeners coincides with Chan-Olmsted and Wang's (2020, p. 684) factors for podcast consumption.

When successful branding through podcasts is mentioned as a success factor for corporate podcasts by the interviewed companies, this is rather implicit in nature. The focus is primarily on the qualitative measurement of success. The quantitative evaluation focuses on the click rate, downloads, number of subscribers and listening time. Regarding the intended impact, it is noticeable that personal and emotional connection, interaction and resonance, an increased reputation and visibility as well as authenticity are mentioned particularly frequently.

This research shows: Podcasts can make your brand heard! They began as a trend within companies' communication channels and over time have become an integral part of them, helping to communicate the brand to listeners. They enable the realization of corporate branding on various levels and thus serve to position companies on an overarching internal as well as external scale. Corporate podcasts are no longer just an accessory but an important must-have for branding nowadays.

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